

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL  
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AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER  
LOWELL FOLKLIFE PROJECT**

INFORMANT: NARIN SAO  
CONDUCTED BY: MICHAEL BELL

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N = NARIN  
M = MICHAEL

LFP-MB-R004-R005

M: So let, let's start all over again. And ah, today is the, November the 4th, 1987. My name's Michael Bell. It's 9:53 now in the morning.

N: Okay. Ah, my name's Narin Sao. I'm working for Lowell Division Unemployment Security in Massachusetts. And I work as a job interviewer.

M: Well one place to start might be just this morning's breakfast.

N: Yeah.

M: Since we were both there. The Unity Breakfast. What did you think of that?

N: Well, it's the, one thing is the, very interesting for, for me and the whole community, especially the Cambodian Community in Lowell, who have like myself, enjoyed that Unity Breakfast this morning. So we met a lot of ah, important persons, people, politician peoples in Lowell. So I'm going to ah, spread out the word to the whole community that this city government really care about that immigrant, and all Southeast Asian.

M: Does voting, being able to vote and so on, is that?

N: Well ah, I know that there's not many people like Southeast Asian Cambodian goes there.  
(M: They're not citizens) Not citizen yet. And some of them they didn't register for vote yet.

M: Who are citizens.

N: Yeah.

M: How long have you been in Lowell?

N: Well, in Lowell only, I've been here since 1984. So almost three years something. More than three years.

M: Did you come directly here?

N: Ah, no. My first land in this, ah in this country ah, Los Angeles. And I lived in Long Beach for three year, before I moved up here.

M: What brought you to Lowell?

N: Well, actually I heard. I have a, my brother who lives in Boston. He came. The first he came, he came to Boston. And after I finished the school in Long Beach, I say, well I call up my brother. And I say, "well, what you think that employment over there?" He say, "okay, unless you can get a job in [unclear] master account or something." Then I decide to ah, to leave California, because it's a task to ah, looking for job. (M: It is) And if you got a job, it's not a better pay, something like that. It's cause lot of ah, of competition of with ah, ah, Mexican people. So they, Mexican people they willing to take any job.

M: Yes.

N: Any pay. They don't mind. So I decide to leave and move up to northeast, New England.

M: What have you been trained in school?

N: Well, I been to school for ah, business, but I'm not finished yet. So I plan to go for four years in college. So, I decide to come here. And finally I met a lot of friend of mine ah, in Lowell invited me say, "well, why don't you come to live in Lowell?" I stay in the Boston for a couple of months. And we putting a diary together to ah, ah, organize the Cambodian M.A.A. And writing proposal to get funding from ah, ah, State Government called [M.O.R.?] Office before now, Massachusetts of Refugees Resettlement.

M: Did you help start the Cambodian (--)

N: Yeah.

M: Was It Mutual Assistance?

N: Yes.

M: Associations?

N: 1984.

M: 1984.

N: Yeah. Who ah, I would like to remind that ah, a friend of mine ah, Michael Ben Ho, who now he's working for ah, DS, Department Social Services in Lowell. Ah, Mr. Narong Hul, he now is a businessman. Opened a store, a Video store down ah, Appleton Street. And [Only?] Sok, now he's leaving Lowell now. He lives in California I believe. He's got a job as the Postman. And ah, Mr., I forgot his name, but he's the brother of Narong, Narong Hul. Now he's working at the D.P.W. So we've been working together. Put the idea how we get organized. And how we get apply for legal service. Everything is appropriate in this country. And a lot of people support like [few words unclear] from friend. So.

M: What kind of changes have you seen in the Cambodian Community in the last four years that you've been here? Has there been?

N: Well, it's a lot of ah, changing is the first. At the time I came here only one agency called Refugee Foundation. Indochinese Refugee Foundation. So that organization they have like a three different group, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian who have only one organization. So at 1985, so we decide well, why don't we just like to go by my own people control that. Laotian decide to go to write my own. And Cambodian, Vietnamese we split that the three different. So, and a lot of changing. We got like ah, ah, E.S.L. Program, unemployment ah, program, interpretation program, housing counselor helping ah, people. So we, we [unclear]. We have our own ah, community. And [unclear] the cultural activity we decide to organize ah, the group that took off for dancing. Who, we have one gentlemen who have, is very on dancing, culture for something like that. So.

M: Who's that?

N: So invite him. His name ah, Thou Chanthoeun T-H-O-U- C-H-A-N-T-H-O-E-U-N. He's the master of dancing now.

M: Thou Chanthoeun.

N: Chanthoeun.

M: Chanthoeun.

N: Yeah. He's, so we invite him and he came to organize and (--)

M: So he's got a dance group put together?

N: Yeah, now he's grow now. At that time about two or three people now, he's the grow. He did a good job.

M: Were there many people in the Cambodian Community who remembered traditional dances at that time, or did they have to learn?

N: Most of them ah, remembered, cause we came, the old people. Ah, so we tried to, to call up the entire community, whoever they have or remember that, the culture, dance, folk something. And then you get the idea and try to improve.

M: What are some of the folk traditions that are, that people are now still practicing in the community?

N: Well, ah, yeah, now I, they have a many kind of dance, dancing. They call like a Blessing dance. Ah, Laos Handkerchief dance, Coconut dance, well many, a lot of that. I can't tell the name.

M: Special dances for different occasions.

N: Ah, yeah. In the past we had participate in many ah, ah, celebration, you know like festival, or New Year. Official celebration we have been participate all that. City government call up we need performing from your community. So we, we happy to participate every time they call up.

M: Do the dancers use ah, live music? Or have the cassettes?

N: No, we have the live music.

M: Yeah. You have musicians too.

N: Yeah. We have ah, it's hard to get the instrument but, we try to call ah, have friend ah, people who lives in the Camp, in Thailand, in Cambodia now, try to get original(--)

M: Instruments.

N: Instruments, yeah. From France something.

M: Who are some of the musicians that are living here? Maybe I should talk to them.

N: I would recommend you to talk to ah, two Thou Chanthoeun. (M: Thou Chanthoeun) He might give second name and you can get idea.

M: Okay. Good. Are there other traditional arts, or crafts carried on?

N: Ah, traditional art, craft, woods, not many.

M: Like wood carving, basket making, embroidery, things like that?

N: Well we, we have people know how to do that, but the difficulty to find that ah, like bamboo material to make it. So is, says people they say well, I tired of trying to find that stuff. So we won't have many like the dance, or something. And ah, well (--)

M: How about traditional stories?

N: Traditional stories?

M: The tales, narratives.

N: Well, I, my first day I came this city I saw a lot of copy telling about the tale, story. Who some translate from French language, some from English, but not many document. It's not many.

M: There are no older people who tell traditional stories, folk tales?

N: Yes. Many old people just keep talking and tell. It's not writing on the paper, or [unclear].

M: Right. Just out of their head.

N: That's right.

M: Memory.

N: Memory, yeah.

M: There is some people who do that?

N: Yeah.

M: Anyone you can think of that ah, I think we should record some of these old stories.

N: I think you can, maybe the old people at the E.S.L. class at the Cambodian M.A.A. (M: Okay) At Adult Education. So people go to take a class, English class. [Unclear] you might meet with them.

M: Okay. It would be good to have them in, speaking in Cambodian, the old stories, that maybe someone could translate.

N: Yeah. That's a good idea.

M: I think that would be nice. What kinds of stories would they tell do you think?

N: Well story about the animal, but is kind story you tell about animal [unclear]. But they can get some idea. Get ah, tell story to people who [unclear] talk from people to people, but is some most is kind of like advisory or,

M: Oh yeah, a moral?

N: A moral, yeah, yeah.

M: A lesson?

N: Lesson for the people.

M: Right.

N: So we have a lot of that kind.

M: How about story (--) Oh! go ahead.

N: And one who the famous like you call it poem and things, his name ah, is Loi, his name ah, Kom Loi. His name Loi, he's ah, ah, ah, what you call like ah, (--)

M: Hero?

N: Hero, yeah.

M: Cultural Hero?

N: He has a lot of document. I don't see, I haven't seen in this a lot of docu, his document is in France. So he wrote in poem, in ah, regular language, or something. Lot of, he's the moral of story, or poem, something.

M: How about the older stories like um, is it Hunan, or the White Monkey?

N: White Monkey, yeah, yeah.

M: Stories about ah (--)

N: Some stories came from ah, ah, India.

M: India.

N: Yeah. So we have a religion, (M: was it Hindu) the Buddhist. Yeah, Hindu and Buddhism. A lot of reason they came into in Cambodia. Hindu religion, Buddhism. [Unclear comment]

M: I guess the food ways, traditional foods is still very much ah, in.

N: Ah, food now even we came this country, people still have their own way to cooking. Cause we have grocery store, Asian store, who imported all the stuff from Thailand, and so that we can have it. And food is, some food is, looks similar to we have different group in here for Chinese, Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian. Some food it looks similar the way they cook it.

M: Right. But the spices different though?

N: Ah, yeah. Most spices is different.

M: Are many Cambodian people changing their diet?

N: Not many.

M: The food? They're not adopting any American food?

N: Not many, except for, for the young, youngster. Now he went to school so he learn the to get enough American food. Like myself, my first, I went to school in Long Beach. Don't have enough time to cook my own food. So I went to ah, McDonald, have fast food. (M: Right) So we save time.

M: That's Right. You like that food?

N: Oh yeah! I get used now. [They both laugh].

M: Did you, where did you go to ah, Long Beach State? Cal State, Long Beach?

N: Ah, no I, I went to Long Beach City College.

M: City College?

N: City College, yeah. It's right close my place. I lived there.

M: How was it at U.C.L.A.

N: Ah, (M: I was) we have a (--) You are?

M: I was (--)

N: Oh, great!

M: Long time ago.

N: We have ah, one Long Beach, University Long Beach, yeah, yeah.

M: Right. What, what are, what kind of problems do you think are facing the Cambodian Community now, in Lowell?

N: Ah, are we been talking about like ah, the way we live here?

M: Umhm. Just, adjusting or (--)

N: Yeah, cultural adjusting.

M: Getting along. Getting along.

N: Yeah, cultural adjusting. The way like ah, I know the, the very important housing. Now that, a lot of young people pricing, get housing problem.

M: The shortage of housing? Not enough housing?

N: Yeah. And I think people do not have enough money to rent a big space like ah, American way living now.

M: Right.

N: One bedroom, two bedroom, for one family. But ah, most Cambodian, most Asian they save the rent to live together in one room or two, three people. So we understand and this kind like ah, even this, this is not the Cambodia or Asian. Even American who live here, they have housing problem. But we proud of that some of the people who some of the family who came here for couple of year and ah, they try to buy their own, purchase their own property. So and then say I rent to those people who couldn't afford to buy that house. Yeah. But we still have a problem for the housing. And ah, [unclear] how you call, ah, language.

M: Language.

N: Barrier for the old people. I know, I understand that it's hard for that old people who try to adopt the American way. The new system, new society. So its make them like ah, a frustrate culture shock between their culture, and the new culture here. Sometimes it's like a contrast between the young and the old people. Parent does not feel comfortable about a kid going out. A daughter going out with a friend, boy friend or girl friend. Goes to our culture. The daughter have to be stay in, inside, not going out ah, without asking permission from parent, or guardian something. But ah, Cambodian M.A.A. try to ah, explain every time we have a like ah, the meeting, community meeting, annual meeting or celebration, explain how the culture, the kids going to school and they learn American way. They weren't going out with boyfriend, girlfriend. So some of the parents understand now. They say okay. But it feels like ah, they can't adopt the whole 100%.

M: So the traditional authority of parents is (--)

N: Is that, yeah.

M: Breaking down? Exchanging?

N: Is having, well we still have a couple of family they have problem with their parent and kid, and their son or daughter. So I'm glad that now we have like a Temple, Buddhist Temple who have Monk and Priest who try to ah, educate, explain how the new system, how the new society we should adapt. But the, the Buddhist Temple still ah, keep their own traditional, teach the people who came in every Saturday and Sunday to listen the Monk explain it. How the Buddhism way, to not drink alcohol, to not stealing something. That ah, that the Buddhist policy.



Do the good thing to the people. Respect all the people. Care your parent. Take care every, everything have to be ah (--) That's why in the celebration, in Temple we don't have any alcohol, no party, no dancing.

M: What are the most different things about this new system contrast to (N: to Cambodian) Cambodian?

N: Well, the big, did I say that ah, the contrast between ah, parent and the young, youngsters and now, because youngsters learn system from new, new side you know, which is problem. But I hope the next, next generation that we be fine. No problem at all.

M: Do you think that eventually given enough time the Cambodian Community will assimilate and give up much of the old culture?

N: I don't think so. It's hard to ah, give up that, the old culture, because that we have ah, the Buddhist Temple who try to keep every, the old culture. So, well it's, but for people who have like ah, what's it called, like a fast idea, or people who are very, what's it called like ah, sophisticate person, so they love everything, they like everything scientifically, or something like that. Some, like well, I like the way I am before.

M: So people will be able to adopt some new things, but keep some old things too.

N: Yeah.

M: Blend.

N: So I would say, let's say about, just 50, but I think that much, just 50%. Fifty is keep the old. Because now it still have a lot of old people who still live. Unless people go to, more, have more education in here. So they say well, this country is the ah [unclear] is the, oh, is called like ah, good advance the country, a lot of idea. Why don't we get it off something who's not, improve the society. I know that some of the culture of the Cambodian culture is not make people improve it. The way living. The way we ah, ah, say, or create that family. Like ah, we believe that a man who the head of the family. And a man just going out and looking, or going work, to work and get money support a family. Woman has just stay home. Take care of housing, housing jobs, housekeeping job. But now they say, look at the American ways. They were man and woman, husband and wife have to going out, go to work, and be that the families, improve the family life. Like ah, my family. My father just only one, he's going to work and support the whole family. My mother take care inside everything. [long sigh].

M: That's very hard to do now.

N: Yeah, difference, see. The big difference.

M: That changed in our culture too.

N: That's right.

M: In the last forty, after World War 11.

N: Yeah.

Y: Would you think in two, or three generations from now (--)

N: Yeah.

M: It's going to be ah, [unclear]

M: People will be adjusted.

N: Adjusted to this society. Yeah.

M: What, what are, what do you see as some of the strong values that the Cambodian people have in their culture? Like what do they value? What is good?

N: On ah, this culture?

M: What things are good? No. In Cambodian culture? What?

N: Um.

M: What things are held up as being very important?

N: Yeah, the culture of Cambodia [unclear]. On the culture they say well ah, they believe who able keep their own traditional, get this call like if people like ah, proud, nationalism, keep their own way. But, I will say that when they escape from the country, they fled the country they said okay, we look back to the past and say, "the way we did, the way we done, the country lose." So a lot of people ah, recognize how that ah, the way we evaluate last century along times ago. Like one thing I, a lot old people believe it, only that a prince, or a king can save the country, because they think the king is a magic person. See, even king did the wrong way, did a mistake. They say, "well, he not did a mistake." That's why country lose [unclear]. Everything the coun, the king did is right. Even they did a mistake, because [death?] see the culture. Is the culture make people sometimes ah, go the right way. Sometimes is a make a worst in the society.

M: Are there many people who feel that they well go back to Cambodia and (N: Ah) the Prince will, the Prince will (N: now it seems like) rule again?

N: In here now like a lot of style politics, in the community. Some of them believe that well, I support King, Prince who can fight back, he can save, he can get a country back. Some of the groups side, politic side believe ah, er, Prime Minister Soun San, because he's the, did not have like any ah, mistake, any corruption in the last couple year, in the last time. And some believe, no, those people, they did a mistake. That's why the country losing. It's now we have a group of ah, like a neutral. They believe only well, we have to have a new person who had idea from this

country, from United State can create, can build up country by, we have three different group, and, or four. One we still believe the Pol Pot Communist way can ah, get back. So.

M: Oh, yeah. There're not too many who sympathize with the communist I wouldn't think.

N: Ah, not many, because [laughs].

M: They were in the camps, and (--)

N: No. They, we've been living with them for two or three years. So we know that, how they did that. They done to us. We lose the friend, and lose our parent, we lose [liberty?] We lose ah all that. That's why most people ah, give up with them.

M: What American values do you think Cambodians see as important, or the best, the best ideas in America?

N: Well, I, this point I would say myself, my personal idea, opinion , I say well, this country is the great democratic idea. I'm not talking about some individual people. But it's a good constitution [unclear] the system. Good management through democracy to have right to ah, explain. In Cambodia, different. Whoever have power, you cannot say. If you say it you get killed, or something. That's why I love this country.

M: You can speak.

N: Yeah. [Unclear] guy did wrong. Just [unclear]. I love the way that.

M: Was that hard to get used to? Do you think people have a (N: well) speaking out of(--)

N: That's what most Cambodian is quiet person.

M: Yeah.

N: Because we, we have been living with the system, King system, detected system. So just okay. Even we saw oh, jeeese, the King did this mistake. That guy in the government system they have corruption, but nobody they are to say that.

M: Yes. [long pause] Are, are there problems in the Cambodian Community with community outside?

N: Now?

M: Other groups? Right.

N: Yeah. You might heard that. Exactly. I, I, my [unclear], but I don't want to say that. This kind like ah, no, even over here, in the United State culture, our culture they, they kind like ah, jealously. (M: Jealous) Challenge. That's why country lose like that. When people say look at

one guy, he's climb up at the top. He's good idea, he have idea. I say, well he's not my side. I don't want him to be the top. That's what the culture, Western culture like that.

M: Do you think it's hard for the non-Cambodian to understand Cambodian culture?

N: That's right. I, but I've been involved a lot of activity in community, different community. I learned from ah, different communities. I say well, what I'm going to get that idea to explain (--)

TAPE COMES TO END